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Residency and the Charter

Chester Smolski

WHEN Providence voters approved a home rule charter in 1980, they took a major step forward in choosing their own destiny, rather than relying on the General Assembly to approve many of their actions. To implement the resulting changes, the date for full compliance of the charter was set at 1983. And since that time, newly hired city workers are required to live in Providence.

This was a controversial decision, and one contested vigorously by firefighters, police and teachers, who number more than 2,100 employees, and all of whom have strong unions. A later court decision ruled that the city has the right to enforce this charter provision.

This has been the case since 1983, and over this time, only four new employees have been excluded. The four cases were well publicized and given approval by the City Council.

Recently, some teachers and firefighters have been given an extension to the six months' period in which to move into the city, because of their inability to find housing. School officials have found it difficult to fill some positions because prospective teachers were unwilling to relocate to the city.

The problem is real, and the mayor indicated in his annual address that he will appoint a committee to make some recommendations.

Should the residency requirement be dropped?

Westchester County, adjacent to New York City, repealed its residency requirement because it could not get qualified help, as median house prices exceeded \$300,000. Nassau County, on Long Island, adjacent to New York City, relaxed requirements so that new employees must be county residents on being hired, but can live outside after appointment.

New York City is wrestling with the question right now. Mayor Edward Koch wants it and Governor Mario Cuomo has endorsed it, but the state legislature may not approve it.

Like New York, the Providence area, faced with the eighth highest house prices in the country, at \$127,000, appears to present a strong case against city residency. But does it?

When national figures on house prices are given, the cities usually mentioned are really part of a metropolitan area — that is, a major city and its suburbs. And it is the suburbs that commonly have the most residents, the most money and the highest house prices. This is the case in the Providence metropolitan area.

Local housing data sources divide Providence into two parts: the East Side, and the rest of the city. Without the area that houses one-fifth of the population — the East Side — Providence had the lowest house prices in the state in 1987, with a median of \$83,000 (half the sales were below this figure), and \$12,000 less than

Central Falls, Pawtucket and Warwick combined, according to the Rhode Island Realtors Association.

The East Side, although high at \$164,750, experienced an 8.4 percent decline in house prices from 1986 to 1987, but even before these high prices, one could ask how many teachers, firefighters and police lived on the traditionally high East Side anyway.

The argument that house prices are too high in Providence is not valid, and eliminating the residency requirement on that basis would be wrong. The shortage of housing resulting from 13 years of burning and demolishing houses has changed, so that over the past two years, 667 more houses have been or are being erected.

The "work for it, live in it" requirement was instituted in the Home Rule Charter and approved by voters because of the recognition that this was a means to get people to return to the city and help in its improvement and revitalization. Now, after 45 years of population decline, the city has turned around and is starting to grow.

At some time in the future, with continued growth, one could imagine making changes in the residency requirement. If there is a burden on some prospective employees, then the mayor's study group could look for adjustments, but this is not the time to drop this positive step for city revitalization.

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